

MICHIGANIANS OF THE YEAR

Detroit area teacher's idea ends up financing thousands of college educations



A copy of a photo of Ellen Thompson, along with husband Bob Thompson, founder of the Thompson Working Family Scholarships, and some of the scholarship recipients.

Daniel Mears, The Detroit News



Kim Kozlowski - The Detroit News

Ellen Thompson is married to a man renowned in Michigan for his philanthropy, and admits that far more people know him than her.

Her husband of 70 years, Bob Thompson, was thrust into the national spotlight in 1999 after the sale of what was then Michigan's largest asphalt paving company, Thompson McCully Co., for \$422 million. He gave away \$128 million, a third of the sale's proceeds, to 550 employees, including 80 longtime employees he made millionaires.

That same year, the couple set up the Thompson Foundation and began giving away their fortune to numerous causes, eventually focusing on education. They funded the building of University Prep, a charter school system in Detroit, and upgraded the technology in several rural Michigan school districts.



Ellen Thompson, along with husband Bob Thompson, founders of the Thompson Working Family Scholarships, have quietly been giving thousands of scholarships to students from working families so they can go to college, taken outside their home in Chelsea, Michigan on May 13, 2025.

Daniel Mears, The Detroit News

But it was Ellen Thompson's idea to create the [Thompson Working Family Scholarships](#), which have touched 6,000 students at four universities and are expected to reach 15,000 students when the foundation sunsets in 2033. The philanthropy could become the couple's greatest legacy and is why she has been named a 2025 Detroit News Michiganiaan of the Year.

"Bob and I believe in education," Thompson said. "We think it will change lives."

What makes the scholarship unique is that it doesn't come from the state or federal government, or a deceased donor, said Lynn "Chick" McNamara Blue, retired vice president of enrollment at Grand Valley State University, where the scholarship began. Blue organized many gatherings for the Thompsons on GVSU's campus to meet the student scholarship recipients, and the kids would show up, Blue said.

"It was remarkable because college kids don't usually go to tea parties, but they were eager to come to know Ellen and Bob because of what she had done for them and their families," Blue said. "She provided enough money so those kids could go to college without having debt up to their nostrils. So they were grateful."

The Thompsons were also down-to-earth and would not sit at a head table, she added. Instead, they sat at the tables with the students.

"They wanted to talk to those kids and know about them, and how they were doing and did they like Grand Valley, and how their semester was going," Blue said. "It was like a family. It was a beautiful thing."

A Cleveland native, Ellen Thompson earned her teaching degree at Bowling Green State University, where she met her husband and married him in 1955.

Thompson's \$3,500 savings from her teaching retirement fund were used in 1959 to start her husband's asphalt paving company. She continued to teach elementary school in Highland Park, Plymouth and Euclid, Ohio, while he built the asphalt business, and the couple lived on her salary.

The scholarship idea was planted during Thompson's years teaching at Highland Park's public schools, where she encountered a bright first-grade student from a family of 11. Thompson suspected her family likely didn't have the means to send her to college.

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ELLEN THOMPSON, FORMER HIGHLAND PARK TEACHER

Thompson suggested to her husband that they fund a college scholarship for students from working families. The fund has since served students attending Grand Valley State, Saginaw Valley State and Michigan Technological universities as well as Bowling Green State University in Ohio, the Thompsons' alma mater.

Established in 2011, the [Thompson Working Families Scholarship](#) matches money from partner colleges to pay for most of the tuition of students who meet certain financial thresholds, are pursuing a bachelor's degree and meet accountability measures. Students must pay any uncovered tuition costs, have a minimum 2.75 GPA, be enrolled in a minimum number of credit

hours and complete 20 hours of community service every year. The goal is for 80% of the students to graduate within four years.

When the foundation sunsets in 2033, it is projected that more than 21,000 students in K-12 schools and colleges will be affected by the couple's giving, expected to exceed \$425 million. Most of the money will have been given to students for the Thompsons' college scholarships, which are expected to reach a total of \$300 million.

Pinckney residents Ron and Rebecca Kramer's daughter, Bridget, graduated from SVSU this spring with a degree in social work and is among the Thompson Working Family scholars. The couple recently wrote to thank the Thompsons because she will only graduate with one loan for \$1,200 as she begins her master's degree at Wayne State University.

"We are blown away that there are people like you in this world that will take their personal money and share with those who have less but still have high aspirations," Kramer wrote. "It is generous in a way that is truly unbelievable."

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<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/michigan/michiganians-of-year/2025/06/05/ellen-thompson-michiganian-detroit-news/83530419007/>

Ellen Thompson

Age: 92

Occupation: Retired school teacher

Education: Bowling Green State University, teaching degree, 1954

Honorary degrees: Bowling Green State University, 2006, Doctor of Humane Letters, College of Education and Human Development; Grand Valley State University, 2017, Doctor of Public Service; and Ferris State University, 2018, Honorary Doctorate of Human Letters

Family: Husband Bob Thompson; children David Thompson, John Thompson, Anne Mott; grandchildren Kevin Thompson, Sarah Kinsinger, Erica Pinedo, Codi Benjamin, Samantha Auvenshine, Savanna Mott; great grandchildren Bentley Pinedo, Blake Pinedo, Brooks Benjamin, Hayden Auvenshine, and baby Kinsinger on the way

Why honored: For creating the idea of the Thompson Working Family Scholarships, which have helped 6,000 students and are projected to aid 15,000 students at four universities by 2033 when the fund sunsets